

HUNGARIAN REFUGEES : LIFE EXPERIENCES AND FEATURES INFLUENCING PARTICIPATION IN THE REVOLUTION AND SUBSEQUENT FLIGHT ¹

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During the period from December, 1956 through September, 1957, 69 Hungarian refugees were interviewed, examined, and observed at the research facilities of the Human Ecology Study Program, in New York.³ The group of informants was carefully chosen to include students, scientists, members of professions, intellectuals, skilled and semi-skilled workers and adolescents, whose motives and behavior were of special interest because of the leading role that such people had taken in the Revolution of October, 1956. Only a few former landowners and members of the old middle class were included. Some of those studied had held positions of trust and responsibility in the Hungarian Communist State, and had been favored members of the society. Many had been acceptable to the Communist Party, and had been associated with its ancillary activities, although they were not actually party members. In order to have data from former Party members also, some of the staff of the Study Program went to Great Britain in the summer of 1957, where they tested, interviewed, and examined 7 additional refugees who had been active Communists, some of whom considered themselves still to be so.

The goal of the investigation was to determine, as far as possible, the factors that had had an important influence upon the behavior and health of these Hungarians. It was, therefore, a study of individu-

als, rather than of the group as a whole, and our conclusions are chiefly pertinent to the behavior of these individuals; however, some of them undoubtedly have a wider general applicability.

The investigation was based upon the hypothesis that the behavior of a man is determined by his constitutional characteristics, his cultural background, his position in the society in which he lives, his developmental experiences, his later life experiences, and his total life situation as this is perceived by him. The procedures were designed to gather data in each of these areas. They included an assessment of the constitutional characteristics of each informant, a careful and extensive chronological life history, a detailed history of all of his illnesses, interviews with sociologists, psychiatrists, and a cultural anthropologist, a series of psychological tests (including the Rorschach, Wechsler-Bellevue, TAT, a projective questionnaire, and a sentence completion test), a physical examination and a period of observation during an informal evening's entertainment. The whole investigation required two days of each informant's time. Each became a source of information about the attitude and behavior of the groups of which he was a member, as well as about his own behavior during his lifetime.

A good deal of effort was focussed upon an attempt to determine why these people fought and fled. The observations give no support to the idea that the revolution and the subsequent exodus were simply the result of the unpremeditated action of people swept up in a wave of mass emotion. On the contrary, they indicate that those who participated in these events had long-term, deep seated, realistic, and highly personal motives for their actions. This was true of nearly everyone studied, regardless of his background or behavior; it was such a regular observation among the students, adolescents, workers, teachers, scientists,

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and professional people that there is very good reason to believe it is true of the refugee group in general.

Their motives fell into two general categories. The first was a long-term and insurmountable feeling of personal insecurity—an implicit belief that, “No matter what I do, or how high a position I may attain, I and my family may be ruined at any time by the actions of others, or by events beyond my control.” The second was a profound sense of frustration—a deep-seated conviction that, “In Communist Hungary there is no way that I can live out my life as I want to, and in a manner that satisfies my needs.” The motives of the individual refugees were not based primarily upon irrational and generally shared prejudice, upon unformulated fear, or upon abstract political or religious convictions; they were based upon personal experiences with confiscation, denunciation, arrest, imprisonment, and the denial of jobs, housing, and education. Such motives were as strong in those who had been ostensibly favored by the Communist Government as they were in those who had been officially designated as “class aliens.”

None of the informants—not even those in a position to be well-informed—had expected the revolution to occur when it did. No group had planned it. The great majority of the informants had not been aware that many other Hungarians felt as strongly as they did. Yet all had been aware of their own intense dissatisfaction for many years past, and a very significant proportion of them had privately decided, long previously, that they would flee from the country, or take part in rebellion, at the first opportunity. In this, many of them were supported by their families—even by family members who knew that they would be left behind. Thus the fight and flight of an individual might have been sudden, but his behavior was not unrealistic, and often not entirely unpremeditated.

Economic deprivation was a poor determinant of behavior. Some of those who participated most vigorously in the revolt were people who were economically better off than they might have been under the old regime, and knew it; others, including members of the old middle class and former

landowners, who had been reduced to abject poverty, took no part in the fighting, but simply fled. The group as a whole were relatively little concerned about the economic organization of the society. Their resentments were focussed upon its “police state” aspects—its arbitrariness, restrictions, brutality, and unpredictability.

Only a minority of our informants had participated in the actual fighting, although all had sympathized with the revolution and many had supported it tacitly or by ancillary activities. Those who took up guns and fought regardless of the consequences were people who readily acted out their hostile and aggressive drives. In general they came from segments of society in which fighting is acceptable behavior; they were adolescents, working people, former soldiers, and former political prisoners. Writers, teachers, scientists, and professional persons confined themselves to organization, propaganda, supply, communication, and like activities.

The group as a whole displayed a deep-seated hostility toward Russians. This had been strongly reinforced by Russian behavior during the past 15 years; but there was much evidence that anti-Russian attitudes existed in their parents before World War II, and that the younger generation had derived their own attitudes primarily from those of their parents.

They had a similar hostility toward the people who made up the central Communist Government group, and toward many of the local functionaries and hangers-on. Attempts by the Communists to indoctrinate young people, students, and workers by means of propaganda, education, and other activities had been singularly ineffective in eradicating such attitudes. Even favored young members of the Communist Party—students and intellectuals who were relatives of prominent Communists, who had grown up in the Party, and who had no real memory of life as it was before 1947—were disillusioned and bitterly opposed to the Communist system. They had learned to form their beliefs and attitudes from what they saw and knew, rather from what they heard or read. They regarded some socialist economic reforms as desirable, but for Communism and Com-

munists they had only contempt and hostility.

A majority of these people had experienced an increased number of episodes of all varieties of illness during periods when they were having difficulty in making a satisfactory adaptation to their social environment, and most notably during periods when they felt insecure, frustrated, and threatened because of their position in the Communist society. This increase in illness appeared to be largely the result of physiological and psychological changes associated with attempts to adapt to an extremely difficult life situation, rather than simply the result of fatigue, injury, poor diet, or other physical aspects of the environment.

During the past 10 years the rate at which these persons had experienced episodes of illness of many types—both physical and emotional—was much higher than that which we have seen during a comparable period in any other group that we have studied(1). Nor have we previously encountered a group of people in whom such a profound degree of insecurity and frustration had been induced by the social environment in which they lived. Judging from the evidence found among the refugees that we examined, the Hungarian Communists were far from creating a welfare state in which everyone was socially secure and without conflict or care—quite the contrary; they had created a society so rigid, arbitrary, unpredictable, danger-laden, and beyond the control of the individual, that a great proportion of the citizens, including some of the Communists themselves, were ready to take any desperate measure necessary to destroy it or escape from it.

The physical dislocation and emotional release associated with the revolution and subsequent flight was accompanied by an improvement in the general health and well-being of the informants, and a decrease in their illness episode rate; however, there is reason to believe that many of them, as they attempt to adapt to a new life in this country, will experience a temporary resurgence of illness, until they have made a satisfactory adjustment to their new life situation.

Among these Hungarians, as among the members of other groups that we have studied, individuals differed markedly in their general susceptibility to illness. Those having the greatest number of illness episodes experienced more types of illness, involving more of their organ systems, and with more "causal" categories. These persons also had experienced the greater number of disturbances of mood, thought, and behavior.

There were some individuals who had lived through remarkably diverse and demanding life situations, including changes in their social position, their physical environment, and their family relationships, with very little illness; while there were others who had experienced many illnesses in settings that appeared to be much more benign. Such differences in susceptibility to illness appear to be dependent upon characteristics of the individual, which are in part determined by his constitutional make-up, and in part by the way that he perceives his environment(2). Evidence from the personality studies indicates that those who perceived their environment as more threatening, challenging, demanding, and frustrating, were the ones who had experienced the greater amount of illness. This feature of the "frequently ill" person has also been observed among Americans of diverse backgrounds, and among Chinese.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The effect that our informants' experiences during the past 15 years have had upon their mental health has become a focus of our concern. Their performance upon the projective tests was such that, were they people drawn from an American middle-class background, one would have expected that a great many of them would be very seriously ill, and that some would have to be placed in mental hospitals. On the other hand, on clinical examination their overt symptoms of psychological illness were, in general, of no great severity, not disabling, and not greatly out of keeping with their present situations. Judged by their history of past performance, and by their ability to survive and not break down in situations of extreme adversity—loss of fortune, loss of social status, loss of family

members, rape, torture, imprisonment, concentration camps, and prolonged insecurity and frustration—they were people of outstanding adaptive capacity; for a great many other people, in similar situations, died or disintegrated. The body of our evidence suggests that unconscious processes may be notably influenced by intense and prolonged adult experiences. It likewise suggests that the interpretation of performance on projective tests must be carefully evaluated in terms of the cultural and social background, and the recent, as well as remote, life experiences of the person tested.

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